

Have You Read the Owner's Manual?

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During my Air Force days (sorry), I had the unfortunate task, on more than one occasion, of investigating the cause of deaths in military families. These deaths occurred in their homes while they were sleeping.

I remember one case in which a mother and father died in their bedroom, leaving the kids without parents. They died because they didn't read the instructions for the UL-approved, American-made, high-quality, portable, kerosene heaters they were using. Those instructions said to open doors and windows to prevent carbon-monoxide poisoning.

"Wait a minute!" perhaps you're saying. "Why would you open doors and windows when you're trying to heat the place?" Granted, it seems illogical, but read the owner's manual for any kerosene heater, and you'll find it says you need plenty of fresh air coming in to keep the space safe. To you I say, "Read the manual."

"But, they're UL-approved!" perhaps you're still arguing. Yes, they are—if you knock them over, the flame is supposed to go out so it doesn't cause a fire. What about the stuff kerosene heaters put into the air, though? Again I say, "Read the manual."

At the same time these folks died, a consumer's magazine tested such units and advised pregnant females and young children not to use the heaters at all. Young children especially are susceptible to carbon-monoxide poisoning.

If you're faced with a loss of power and have to run a kerosene heater just to keep the pipes from freezing,



I seriously urge you to consider living somewhere else while the heater is running. If you can't follow that advice, then please read the manual and keep plenty of fresh air in your home.

I can't emphasize enough the deadly consequences of carbon-monoxide poisoning. In another case I once investigated in off-base housing, a permanently installed water heater had an exhaust pipe that ran through the house. There was just one problem. The pipe had a very small hole in it—in the bathroom where a young mother was soaking in the tub, with the door locked.

After a while, her toddler banged and banged on the door, calling for mommy. It was too late, though; she already was dead from carbon-monoxide poisoning.

Please pay attention to safety messages, and before you use anything that burns fuel, read the owner's manual. ■

Homes with any type of furnace or water heater, or with a garage attached, should have carbon-monoxide detectors, as well as smoke/fire detectors.—Ed.

The author is a supervisory industrial hygienist.

Resources:

- <http://www.epa.gov/iaq/pubs/coftsht.html>
[Protect Your Family and Yourself From Carbon-Monoxide Poisoning]
- <http://www.iii.org/media/publications/brochures/kerosene/> [Kerosene Heater Safety]